

THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

PERIODICAL DEPT.

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Time for Criticism

Since the Japanese attack on us in December forced us into the arms of most of us who teach English have had to answer frequently questions as to the value of subjects in wartime, and many have then taken the opportunity to defend the liberal arts. I agree wholeheartedly with the people who uphold the value of the liberal arts college in time of war; but I find myself wondering whether there are true liberal arts colleges left in this country, and whether an examination of our courses of study will show how great a tendency there has been to let colleges go in the direction of technical schools. On the one hand, because of the emphasis on laboratory work in the sciences as chemistry and physics, and toward schools of fine arts on the other hand, because of the emphasis on practical subjects, the undergraduate theatre, and even radio tech-

believe that the offering of the liberal arts department in any college is a fairly accurate gauge of the position of the whole college, and that we may with benefit to the whole college ask ourselves certain questions: How many of our courses really carry out promises, and how many represent unfounded and unfulfilled expectations that eighteen year old students can write either plays or fiction, always at college level? How many of the literature courses provide a solid basis for appraisal of the great literature of the past and the worth of literature of the present? How many survey courses now are composed of writers since Eliot and Hemingway, with extracts from earlier writers like the use of the word "surroundings" not altogether ridiculous? How many of the survey courses really provide foundations for later, specialized reading, and not a few classics chosen at random that five-foot grab bag of digested and indigestible material known as world literature? I confess that I am disposed to look at the great emphasis on the literature fashionable to the so-called research in it is a disaster for my taste; for the literature there is not much first-class American literature, and undervalued admiration of the tenth-rate and neither for the past nor for the future.

I suggest that this is a good time for English teachers to turn a cold, critical eye on all of their offerings. There has been too much aridity of the history of our language and of the older authors, so

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FOURTH ANNUAL MEETING of the COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Hotel Astor, New York City
December 28 and 29, 1942

General Theme: The Undergraduate English Classroom During This War, and After.

★

MONDAY, DEC. 28—3:30 P.M.
Hotel Astor

A Panel Discussion: "The Humanities at Bay"—John Erskine, Walter Pritchard Eaton and others. General discussion.
5:30 P.M. Business meeting.

ANNUAL DINNER

Mon., 7 P.M. Hotel Edison.
Toastmaster, Burges Johnson.
Speakers, Pres. Howard Lowry, Mr. Christopher Morley.

★

TUESDAY, DEC. 29—10 A.M.
Hotel Astor

Subject and Speakers: To be announced.

Registration Monday at entrance to meeting hall.

Registration Tuesday morning with MLA registrants.

Non-members are welcome at both meetings and the dinner. Please notify Prof. Donald L. Clark, Columbia University, by postcard if you plan to attend the dinner.

Program Committee:

Chairman, Strang Lawson, College Univ.; Scully Bradley, Univ. of Pennsylvania; Ernest E. Leisy, Southern Methodist Univ.; John Abbot Clark, Michigan State College; Atwood H. Townsend, New York Univ.

Local Committee:

Chairman, Mary A. Wyman, Hunter College; Donald L. Clark, Columbia Univ.; Margaret Bryant, Brooklyn College; Martin J. Freeman, Hunter College; Margaret Schlauch, New York Univ.

"Culture" in War-Time

In time of war prepare for peace. War is abnormal; life must go on, and all its proper and wholesome activities must be maintained for our welfare and the welfare of those who come after us. War is a dire emergency that we must meet with all our power; incidentally, it is an emergency that everyone trained as I was in the school of Theodore Roosevelt knows we should have been fully prepared to meet and should always be prepared to meet; but to drop all culture, all the humanities because of war is to relapse into a Hitlerian, book-burning barbarism. Yes, we must save a world, but what sort of world do we wish to save? Not a world destitute of literature, music and art and the taste, training and ability to appreciate and produce them. Even in times of peace there are too many who are ready to cry down any studies that do not directly lead to making more money; we should not now be misled into throwing overboard everything that liberal minds would reject as not directly connected with war effort.

Perhaps twelve years ago I was talking with the late Ellis Parker Butler about a novel definition of culture presented in a new book on the subject. Butler's comment was,

"To me, culture is anything that enables one to be happy when alone." We all need internal resources to help us to go on living sanely and with a degree of happiness. So we eagerly recognize that our soldiers should have sports, music, plays and books; those of us who must remain behind the lines have similar requirements.

Ordinarily our best technical schools, although their practical courses are so exacting, admit that the future bridge-builder will be a better and happier man if good literature has stimulated his imagination,—he needs Shakespeare as well as Euclid, rhythms as well as logarithms. Now when in our colleges the urgent demand is for war training, there will inevitably be reduced attendance in literature classes, but they should carry on as before, neither ignoring nor over-emphasizing the fact that we are at war. If I were lecturing, I should be inclined to devote some time to soldier poets of different times, particularly those who philosophized on war, even lightly as did Lovelace and the other Cavaliers, though I doubt if I should pay much attention to spirited battle pieces, as such. However, there is plenty to interest and awaken the student.

Arthur Guiterman.

The Humanities in Time of Crisis

The serious study of the humanities in the colleges of America is on the way out.

Indeed, the humanities as a group are now in a position analogous to that of the classics at about the turn of the century. They are still alive and kicking, but they are smitten with a mortal disease. And the study of humanities will die the lingering death of the classics unless something is done to re-awaken the public and the educators to the profound importance of the value-studies, the humanities, to every individual in the democratic world. The desperate need for technically trained men and women for the war effort will inevitably accelerate the demise, though it should be noted here that the war itself is in no way the cause of the present situation. It merely aggravates the disease.

Naturally, during our tremendous efforts to win the war all studies, like all other activities, not contributing directly and immediately to the crushing of our enemies must be subordinated to others. There is no question that technological knowledge and skill, particularly in the material sciences and engineering, are now of primary importance. But in the long view every teacher of literature must realize that after the war a vast preponderance of technically trained men lacking the insights that only a knowledge of the humanities can give may result in the loss of many if not all of the values for which we believe we are fighting today. The downfall of the humanities will signalize a lapse into a kind of technocracy compared to which Hitlerism at its worst is little more than a harbinger of a slavery as yet only dimly realized but which will almost certainly be far more absolute and inhuman than any so far known in the world.

The teachers of the humanities should have seen the handwriting on the wall before now. For two generations there has been a steady decline in the prestige of the humanities. Every year, fewer and fewer college students come into significant contact with the best that has been thought and said in the world. In the colleges the humanities have been relegated largely to omnibus courses which do little more than prick the surface of the subject and to specialist courses populated almost exclusively by young women intending to teach and by young men looking for "a pipe."

If it were merely that certain "departments" and certain individual teachers were to be dumped upon the scrap heap of obsolescence, there would be little cause for con-

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CHAP. BOOK (No. 4)

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THE NEWS LETTER

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Editorial

We are all of us being schooled in the meaning of the term "inflation," until the threat of it is clear to the simplest intelligence. Wages in defense industries increase during war time, and the majority of workers are drawn into such work. They have more money to spend; but the things for which they like to spend money—the luxuries and many of the necessities—are reduced in quantity, so that prices for them are bid up. The teacher must pay these higher prices, but he is the one worker in essential industry who is not increasingly able to do so.

The English classroom supplies an essential unit in the education of our young people in war time,—not only as preparation for civilian life but for the armed services; this is the testimony of all who speak with authority. An English teacher is, therefore, a needed worker in a defense industry. Indeed he occupies a unique place, for he is the one war worker whose position is not assured, and whose wages are constantly threatened with reduction.

The college itself, economically speaking, is a unique sort of defense factory. It not only does not operate at a profit, but it is unworthy of its trust if it does not operate at a loss! In other words, it must spend more than it takes in, and make up the difference from trust funds or other charitable gifts or from state subsidy. It, too, is an essential industry; but instead of growing because of the demands of war, it shrinks, and its income from its business fall off.

It has always been a characteristic of the college that if it finds itself in a tight place financially, it does not borrow first from the

public or from a bank, but it borrows from its own teaching employees with no guarantee to them that the loan will ever be repaid. In fact, there are few instances on record where the loan was repaid, although there have been cases where the wages were restored to their former level.

This is neither a protest nor a complaint. It is a statement of interesting and, to us, important fact. Despite its obvious truth, most teachers who are quite competent to engage in other activities will still teach, because they believe that is their "calling." Those who teach because they are not competent to do anything else are a negligible quantity. The teacher's loyalty to his task, despite the facts here cited, is taken for granted, or he would not be counted upon to provide essential training for young men about to serve in the armed forces.

An announcement of a new course in the Turkish Language at Indiana University reaches the editorial desk, and starts us inquiring about the script now officially used in Turkey. We are relieved to learn that both the Roman and the Turkish alphabet are authoritative. For our frivolous editorial mind recalls Bill Nye's comment of long ago:

"How the Arabian poets succeeded so well in writing their verse in their own language I can hardly understand. I find it very difficult to write poetry which will be greedily snapped up and paid for, even when written in the English language. But if I had to paw around for an hour to get a button-hook for the end of the fourth line, so that it would rhyme with the button-hook in the second line of the same verse, I believe it would drive me mad."

Announcements

The College English Association's annual dinner will be held at seven o'clock Monday evening, December 28th, at the Hotel Edison. It will be a social get-together for English teachers, members and non-members, with several distinguished authors as guests.

Checks and reservations for the dinner must be in the hands of Mr. Donald L. Clark not later than Friday, December 25th. Send \$1.75 to Donald L. Clark, 301 School of Business Building, Columbia University, New York City. Please cooperate with your local committee by helping them to estimate in advance the number who will be present.

Members of the CEA will receive with this issue of the "News Letter" a fourth "Chap Book" *Your Pipes into Trumpets* by Frank Prentice Rrand. Non-members may secure copies from the Secretary at 10c per copy, postage free.

In its early issues the "News Letter" published a number of poems sent in by teacher members. What has happened to our songsters? Verbum sap.

CEA members living outside the metropolitan area who plan to visit New York for the annual annual meeting in December and who would enjoy guest privileges at a New York City club, will please notify the Secretary.

From the Mail Bag

Dear Editor:

I can imagine nothing more boring to a class of students than a course in literature based on current propaganda, and nothing more futile either as instruction in literature or a contribution to the war effort. There is perhaps more to be said for Plato and the classics, but if even they are studied solely as ground work in the democratic dogma, it seems silly to me to call the course, "Literature." It is the history of ideas. I don't think I ever said, anyhow I hope I didn't, that the greatest plays are those written with a social purpose. Social purpose plays have marked the growth of modern realism, and have possibly of late contributed also to its decline. A great play can be written out of social purpose, but it can also be written out of any other strong feeling. I fail to see the social purpose in Hamlet or King Lear. But luckily I don't have to teach literature, or even many undergraduates. All I try to teach is playwriting, and of course you don't tell your students what to write about. They write about what most interests and excites them at the moment. Just now that happens to be, in some cases, but not all by any means, the war and the relation of the young to the war. (And they don't always feel about the war as the WACKS and the WAVES think they should feel, either—but I don't feel that it is any of my business). What we are trying to do is to keep the theatre arts alive, and if possible growing. That's enough of a job for me, anyhow.

Walter Prichard Eaton
Yale University.

Dear Editor:

Whether this is adding defense training to English teaching or not I shall allow readers to decide. The building of post-war international relationships was my chief objective in the following plan, aside from good composition. The students seem definitely interested.

In one of the freshman English sections I am having the students make special study of South America. Most papers written for the two semesters will deal with what they find in their reading. Specific research topics will be left to student choice individually; one student might be interested in history, another in natural resources, another in government, another in schools or still another in engineering.

Other countries or continents might just as well have been used as South America; it may be that my interest led to the selection. Partly at least I limited the selection so that there may be class forums where different groups of three or four students may be leaders with others well able to par-

ticipate because of the concentrated field of study.

Wendell M. Burditt,
Alfred University.

Dear Editor:

You are right, the history of journalism has never been told. It is a research problem and should be told in relation to the advance of the machine age. As machines got ready to make things, American newspapers led the world in creating wants which were supplied by industries of this country; thus the manufactured things moved from the side door of the factory to the hands of the consumer. The American press, especially since 1840, has been the hand maiden of invention and managerial talent. It has, by sowing the seeds of ambition, given the United States a tremendous impulse toward economic development by harrowing the soil of our national life and warming those seeds of divine discontent in the hearts of the people. So the seeds of new wants eventually sprang up into a new life.

William Allen White.

Dear Editor:

Thoreau would have heartily approved of your correspondent's letter attacking his "Walden" in the September "News Letter." Nothing would have pleased him better than the idea of students fighting their protesting way to arrive at "uncowed judgments" upon that book. The more they protested, the more they disagreed (he would have said) the better the hope of an education. What predigested pay trickling into their brains without a ripple had they been reading! As for his egotism, he would have smiled, remembering John Donne and his [late made friend, Walt Whitman. But "innocence" would have delighted him. I fear it was a dangerous innocence.

Your CEA member thinks his social theory amounts to living in a certain way as long as you can count on the patience and charity of your neighbors. He is wrong. Thoreau's patience was expended on learning to live without compromising on the wrong principles—something that America might have learned with immense advantage, say ten years before the beginning of appeasement. He asked little of his neighbors and gave much. Thoreau was somewhat of a snob in the presence of those unwilling to do their own thinking. Such snobs have their value.

Henry Seidel Canby.

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What Has "English" To Do With the War?

Today each student, each teacher is asking himself what his work has to do with America's share in this war, what it has to do with democracy, what it has to do with the world after the war. "English," as a study, rarely appears in the headlines; they advertise studies of immediate usefulness to our armed forces, scientific and vocational studies. The Secretary of the Navy, and the Secretary of War, to be sure, have spoken publicly of the importance of the ability "to report facts and to express ideas clearly." Secretary Knox has even gone so far as to say that "the ability to use clear, concise, and forceful English in speech and in writing underlies and reinforces efficiency in any and all branches of the Naval Service." But is this all that "English" is for in this war?

I believe it is for this and for much more.

If we are to win this war we must know, all of us, women as well as men, what we are fighting for. It is not enough that our armies must outmaneuver the armies of the enemy, that our men must kill more and faster than the enemy kills. We must know why our men kill and destroy. We must know why our men have to be killed. We and our men must have a purpose, a purpose nearer than life itself, a purpose on which those who come after us can build a new world, a world far better than the world we have built and are now building.

I maintain that such a purpose is to be found in the literature of the Western World, our heritage. I maintain further that "English" reveals this purpose to us, here and now in this crisis, and hereafter.

Our literature, which we study in "English," teaches the value of the individual, it teaches the responsibility of democracy; it shows that man must surrender to no one his right to think and to think for himself. It teaches reverence for that which is greater than man; justice in man's dealing with his fellows; it teaches that ideals are not dreams, but realities of daily life.

In Greek drama and philosophy, in Roman organization and law, in medieval spirituality, in the intellectual excitement of the Renaissance, even in the modern and often mistaken attempt to separate man from man by sacrosanct national boundaries, there is constant, unmistakable endeavor to learn what freedom is and to establish it wherever man dwells on earth.

Thus the study of literature, of "English" in its broadest, noblest sense, forces us to think of freedom, of what it means, forces us to think of our responsibility to establish freedom for ourselves and for our fellow-men. It is for this reason that the study of English is vital to the winning of this war and to the welfare of the world after this war is won.

Mary A. Hill,
State Teachers College,
Flagstaff, Ariz.

The Time for Self Criticism

(Continued from Page 1)

that Chaucer, for instance, so fine a story-teller and so great a poet, has been made to seem dull. The fellow-travelers among us have done their utmost to drive Shakespeare from the field, the poor man's concern with kings and queens making him unfit for the proletariat. Almost all the great writers need to be given their chance again, especially the Victorians, who have suffered at the hands of as biased and ignorant a group of critics as any age has produced. It is absurd to refuse a place to contemporary writers, but is criminal of teachers of English to present them in a vacuum, as if there had been no literary influences on them and no background against which they worked; and general statements in lectures will never take the place of firsthand acquaintance with the writers of the past whose words and ideas and technique influence our writers today.

Obviously, where the English department exists in a fine arts school masquerading as a liberal arts college, we must accept the situation or with a considerable effort return to the old liberal values and the well-grounded curriculum. I do not see why people who believe that presenting a mediocre contemporary play is more cultural than studying great plays of the past and present should object to calling the institution which permits this a fine arts school. There is a place in our academic world for Bennington as well as for Bryn Mawr; but while I am sure that there is a distinct role for the liberal arts college even in a world at war, I am not sure whether the fine arts school may not be a luxury we shall be obliged to give up for the duration, along with the fine arts elements in our English departmental offerings. We shall gain nothing but scorn by keeping the name liberal arts and changing the substance: sugar from a flour-sack will not make nourishing bread.

Anne B. G. Hart
Smith College.

The Humanities in Time of Crisis

(Continued from Page 1)

cern. But if it be true that we are now fighting for freedoms so hard-won through centuries of struggle, what shall we say if these freedoms be lost by our own default after the war to preserve them is won?

The signs of this default are already ominous in the educational world. One or two have already been pointed out. We may note one other. The most serious because it is within the ranks of the teachers of the humanities themselves is the double rift splitting the professor into three mutually hostile camps. One includes those who would study the humanities "scientifically," and here lie down together the student of linguistics, the psycho-pathologist of literature and art, the mechano-technical dissector of style, and others too irksome to mention. Another includes

those who would study the humanities "historically," and here work peaceably together the dusty grubbers in ancient archives, the source hunters, and the revivers of the dead works of happily forgotten authors ruthlessly disinterred in the rather ghoulish business of turning up "contributions to knowledge." A third includes those who would study the humanities as humanities, but these with the best of intentions have often failed to appreciate the human values of modern science and therefore have often ended in a wilderness of medievalism not all consonant either with modern scientific knowledge on the one side nor with the best that has been thought and said on the other. Considering this situation, we might well remember that when the doctors disagree the quacks take over.

Perhaps one should not be unduly critical of any of these however. Their work, by and large, is important. The essential thing to note here is that these divisions exist. Their effect upon the teaching of the humanities, and more particularly upon the opinions of the general public and of the administrators of our educational institutions, has not been to the benefit of the humanities, nor to the benefit of the students or teachers of the humanities. Now each of these various approaches may be of great value as an approach to a specific problem in research; but no one of them ought to be regarded as adequate to the teaching of literature or the other humanities. For the humanities have as their subject matter evaluations of human experience in any or all of its conceivable forms and no restrictions save the limitations of that experience and the artist's ability to record it ought to be imposed by critic or teacher.

What we teachers of the humanities need to do—and the CEA should serve as the best possible center of such a movement—is to prepare now for the fight for the very existence of the humanities as fundamentally important studies of the highest importance in the development of enlightened free minds and civilized and cultured characters.

The will to peace and justice and brotherly love underlies much of the great tradition of western civilization. A race of men trained only to the technical perfection and efficiency of machines, however, can have little truck with such theoretical nonsense. In a war-shattered world our chief hope for the future lies in the thorough inculcation of the Graeco-Christian tradition which is the basis of our highest hopes for humanity. If the job is done, it will have to be the teachers of the humanities, particularly the teachers of literature, from the lowest to the highest levels of the educational system, who will have to do it.

Vernon E. Lichenstein
Coe College.

All Members are invited to contribute to the December NEWS LETTER. Anything from brief comments to one thousand-word articles. Mail them before Nov. 25.

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The College English Teacher and the War

In this age of seeming unreason, the college English teacher asks himself how he can keep his reason. Belatedly, he becomes aware that he has remained too much the individualist and that his ego like every other human being's must be greatly deflated.

He knows that the ominous cracks that appear in the walls of his tower of ivory are due to many causes. Gathering materials for the new monograph fails to hold his interest, and he decides that the time spent on that must be cut down greatly, or the work must be stopped, until the war is over. He learns that the college administration, after a careful study of enrollment figures of the coming year, has decided that his upper-class courses must be discontinued, and that he must teach nothing but freshman composition and sophomore literature. Summer school teaching may be required. He hears rumors, that are all too reliable, of a salary cut. Can he make any decision about the future? He knows that if he goes into the service there is practically no chance of his being allowed to continue to teach. Many an English teacher considers seriously the possibility of applying for a commission in the army or the navy, doing specialized work for which he discovers his training fits him. But before trying to do so, if he has registered and has dependents, he will probably talk things over with the local draft board, who may assure the teacher that until the pressure for men is greater, teaching English is for him essential war work, and that rushing to apply for a commission immediately will serve no good purpose.

And now the English teacher has to decide how to live like a sensible human being.

He must go in for civilian defense. Many students, faculty, and townspeople are cheerfully losing sleep, renouncing cards and gossip sessions, in order to do various kinds of work. He should have begun training months ago, immediately after the talks by the leaders of the local civilian defense, who were certainly not overstating, when they said that every man, woman, and child should prepare intelligently, if the whole country were to profit by the tragic mistakes of other countries. He may decide to begin with a first aid course: undoubtedly, he will be surprised by the orderly presentation of the material by the physical education teacher. The English teacher will find that the mediocre quality of the work he did many years ago as a Boy Scout is a liability rather than an asset. He must be on his toes if he hopes to be as useful as the manager of the town power plant who has already helped save two lives by artificial respiration. Finally, the English teacher takes the examination, on which he knows he has made many a "howler"; but he fervently prays that none of them may become legendary like that of the examinee who insisted that to control arterial bleeding at the throat a tourniquet

should be applied around the neck. Afterwards, the English teacher may decide to take up advanced first aid. Or he may decide to drive an ambulance. Or he may decide to try plane spotting from the tower of the nearby church: he has learned to respect everyone connected with this work, which is far more wearing than a cross-country or a six day bicycle race.

He is certain to discover that it is possible now for him to occupy himself a small part of the time at a task that he once was convinced would prove to be too distracting and exhausting for him to carry with other work. Gladly he finds, too, that the results are always so anti-climactic as to prevent him from ever being cast in the role of hero. But he has much more important work, that of making his teaching more effective.

He tries to decide how the training that he gives students, most of whom are preparing to enter the service, can be said to justify itself by making them more nearly competent in their use of the English language, as Secretaries Knox and Stimson advise. The teacher's problem becomes increasingly complex, because he knows that the students are affected in various ways by the prospect of war: for instance, a few are more sceptical than ever about the wisdom of making the slightest effort to study; many would prefer to have more time for study but they, like him, are extremely busy with civilian defense work; and almost all give way at times to moods of reverie, as they wonder whether they and those dear to them may be at the siege of Berlin or Tokio, and if so, whether they are likely not to come back at all—or what might be worse—come back permanently disabled. The teacher, to meet this complex situation, will decide that his standards should not be lowered; and that his aim should not be changed if it is to offer the discipline of education in a branch of humane learning that develops in all, but to varying degrees, proficiency in writing and speaking English, and the capacity for reading broadly and critically.

He is aware that more than ever he must experiment, in the light of his own experience, to improve his methods in many ways, even though he must be satisfied with the attainment of a state far removed from the ideal of perfection. For example, he must labor more persistently to remove the taint of pedantry; he should work harder to enlarge the range of his sense of humor, so that gravity will not become too deep rooted in his nature; and he should try to be more natural and direct, patient and sympathetic in his dealings, and thorough in the treatment of his subject and tentative in his judgments, if he is to be more successful in arousing in the student the desire and the effort to learn.

The English teacher's perceptions will be sharpened by this new kind of existence, and he will live with greater calm and reasonableness, even though he may have to give up teaching for a time.

W. R. Richardson,
College of William & Mary.

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